

GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY CONFERENCE

"Construction of Realities"

Sponsored by
The est Foundation

January 9 through 13, 1978

San Francisco

ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITIES

The conference On the Construction of Realities will be held in San Francisco, California, January 9 through 13, 1978.

PURPOSE

This conference will explore the specific ways in which we, individually and collectively, produce our physical and social realities. It is an attempt to give substance and coherence to the emerging contemporary understanding that our world comes about literally through our participation. Our theme, then, is the intuition that the notion of objectivity, in both common sense and scientific thinking, is reaching the limits of its productivity, and that we can now approach the interdependence between knower and known through an elucidation of the processes involved in the construction of experiential realities.

There are several living traditions which question the attribution of an independent existence to our experiential worlds. This conference will build on those traditions by focussing on specific issues in two contemporary realms: scientific and social.

The constructive view of reality can be seen as arising from the very attempt of modern science to achieve objectivity. Studies on the mechanisms of biological autonomy, the dynamics of the nervous system, cognitive and linguistic processes, the structure of social order, and the history of ideas, are germane to an understanding of reality construction in specific terms. We will convene pioneering researchers from these disciplines to generate an exchange that will reveal the commonalities of views and experiences among these researchers, and the gaps and problems in understanding as well.

A second essential focus of the conference is on the implications of the participatory nature of reality for our personal and social lives. To restrict our discussion to a purely academic realm would miss the core of these implications. Like any other predominant view of human knowledge at other times in history, the idea of objectivity had an important part in determining the common sense thinking and social attitudes in contemporary cultures. How will these attitudes be changed by the responsibility and disappointment of recognizing our experiential reality as a mirror of ourselves? We are ignorant of how this emerging view of human knowledge might become manifest in our individual and social lives; this question will be an integral part of the discussion.

SCENARIO

These issues clearly require an exploratory approach. Thus, the conference is designed as a mutual teaching situation rather than as a presentation of technical papers.

On each of the four working days of the conference, a different area of discussion will be emphasized:

Tuesday: Cognition and cognitive domains

Wednesday: Language and semiotics

Thursday: Social processes

Friday: Epistemology and social reality

Each discussion area will be introduced by a main speaker and addressed by three other scheduled speakers. Participants are asked not to prepare a new formal presentation for this conference, but to make use of material already published or in process. The scheduled presentations will occupy half or less of the session times; the balance of the sessions will be devoted to discussion. All 16 scheduled participants, as well as the non-scheduled participants (see list), will take part in the discussion at each session.

The main speakers' primary responsibilities will be to delineate the topic of discussion and to stake out the basic ground; the other scheduled speakers will present their own work within that context. Thus, the goal of establishing a mutual teaching situation will be served by participants presenting their research and insights in such a way as to make their work relevant to the intentions of the conference and accessible to the other participants.

The participants will receive representative papers of their fellow conferees, well in advance of the conference, and will be asked to familiarize themselves with these materials, at least in the areas of their own interests. We assume that acceptance of our invitation to attend indicates willingness to participate to this extent, so that discussions can begin on some common ground.

The conference will be recorded, and an edited version presumably published.

The conference is financed by a grant from The est Foundation of San Francisco.

CONFERENCE: INTENT, STRUCTURE

(meeting of 2/26/77)

A. Conference Intention

It will be a mutual teaching situation rather than a talking at situation. The structure of the conference will reflect this intention.

Each day will involve discussion of the main area of interest as listed under the day in the proposed schedule.

B. Participants

Each participant will be present at each session, and there will only be three to five speakers including the main speakers who are essentially responsible for teaching what they know in that area.

Participants are not expected to write papers for this conference specifically, but to present already-done material in an appropriate fashion.

C. Main Speaker Function

The main speaker will speak first and provide an overview of the field, a context for what follows. The other speakers will speak more briefly. The talks will be interruptable, not very formal presentations.

D. Emcee

There will also be an "emcee" of each session, probably one of the organizers chairing each session. He will be responsible for keeping things flowing and on track, for catalyzing the communications as much as possible.

E. Chairman

The chairman (and perhaps the emcee) should encourage behind-the-scenes communication and clarification and see to it that the interesting material gets into the public forum.

F. Sessions

Sessions will go on for perhaps six hours per day; contact between participants between sessions will be encouraged.

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ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITIES

5/20/77

Cognition & cognitive domains

*von Glasersfeld
Maturana
Inhelder
Pask

Language & semiotics

*Becker
Linde, Goguen (one presentation)
Kristeva
Bateson

Social processes

*Michael Moerman
Flores
Watzlavick

Epistemology & social reality

*Moscovici
Feyerband
Apel
Radnitzky

Non-scheduled participants

Erwin-Tripp
Burton
Howe
Hayward
Illich
Goffman

REALITIES CONFERENCE: INVITED PARTICIPANTS

Karl-Otto Apel, U. Frankfurt am Main, West Germany
Gregory Bateson, U. of California, Santa Cruz
Alton Becker, U. of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Dudley Burton, U. of California, Santa Cruz
Susan Erwin-Tripp, U. of California, Berkeley
Paul K. Feyerabend, U. of California, Berkeley
Fernando Flores, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California
Erving Goffman, U. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
Joseph A. Goguen, U. of California, Los Angeles
Jeremy Hayward, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado
Richard H. Howe, U. of Illinois, Champaign
Ivan Illich, Cuernavaca, Mexico
Bärbel Inhelder, Centre Epistemologie Genetique, Geneva
Julia Kristeva, Universite de Paris, France
William Labov, U. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
Charlotte Linde, U. of California, Berkeley
Humberto Maturana, U. of Chile, Santiago
Michael Moerman, U. of California, Los Angeles
Serge Moscovici, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris
Gordon Pask, Brunel University, London
Gerard Radnitzky, U. Göttingen, Sweden
Francisco Varela, U. of Colorado
Heinz von Foerster, Pescadero, California
Ernst von Glasersfeld, U. of Georgia, Athens
Paul Watzlavick, Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto, California